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### Toward a theory of culturally relevant critical teacher care: African American teachers' definitions and perceptions of care for African American students

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# **Toward a theory of culturally relevant critical teacher care: African American teachers' definitions and perceptions of care for African American students**

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Growing research evidence on the ethic of care suggests that caring should be an integral part of the pedagogical methods implemented in schools. However, the colour blind 'community of care' often described in the literature does not disaggregate lines of ethnicity or race and much of this existing literature concerns elementary- and middle-school students. This phenomenological study examined teacher care for African American secondary students, through a theoretical lens of critical race and care theory, as it was represented through the counter stories of eight 'successful' African American teachers. Findings revealed that teachers' definitions and perceptions of care reflected a blend of traditional care literature, critical race theory and the literature on African American teachers before and after the US Supreme Court's landmark *Brown* decision on integration. Findings also reveal the possibility of a pedagogy that I refer to as 'culturally relevant critical teacher care'.

## **Introduction**

'Children,' she began, 'today will decide whether you succeed or fail tomorrow. I promise you, I won't let you fail. I care about you. I love you. You can pay people to teach, but not to care.' (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982, pp. 26–27)

Although students benefit greatly from schools with a well-designed and coherent curriculum, state-of-the art equipment, cutting edge technology and strong instructional leaders, providing a caring classroom environment is also an important part of helping students succeed. The teacher–student connection, one of the more powerful pieces of the academic achievement puzzle for students, is of key importance to students of colour in present day classrooms (Siddle Walker, 1993; Strahan & Layell, 2006). Nevertheless, in today's desolate climate of privatisation, standardisation and

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corporatisation of schooling, the importance of school climate and a basic respect for the humanness of education, educators and students has primarily been ignored.

Literature that discusses teacher care affirms that students experience positive school outcomes, such as improved attendance, attitude, self-esteem, effort and identification with school, if they believe their teachers care for them and their well-being (Steele, 1992; Noblit *et al.*, 1995; Noddings, 1995). However, researchers have yet to mesh their work in order to provide a more comprehensive definition of teacher care (Rogers & Webb, 1991; Alder, 2002).

Like the Critical Legal Studies scholars of the 1980s, who induced an important social action critique of the legal field but failed to fully include the voices and concerns of minority cultures (Dalton, 1995), theorists in the field of care and moral development, though well-meaning and initiating an essential conversation about the importance of affective concerns in education, have failed to fully include or address the perspectives of under-represented or subaltern<sup>1</sup> populations. Furthermore, researchers who address moral development and caring in education do not fully include the voices of subaltern or high school populations (McBee, 2007).

African American<sup>2</sup> students have been described as 'one of the most disenfranchised and underachieving segments of the nation's K-12 student population' (Howard, 2003). Despite being one of the so-called 'beneficiaries' of many US public school restructuring and educational reforms, such as Title I, Headstart and Success for All, African American students and many other students of colour are struggling in the public education system (Irvine 1990, 1999; Gay, 2000; Howard 2002). Even more tragically, many of these students have simply given up and dropped out of school (USA National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2004), despite myriad programs that claim to leave no child behind. In noting these facts, it becomes clear that policy makers, schools of education and even schools themselves need to reevaluate the ways in which attempts are being made to 'help' these students.

Fortunately, looking to the arena of teacher caring may provide some help. Growing research evidence suggests care has been an integral part of culturally responsive pedagogical methods and characteristics purposefully demonstrated by a number of African American teachers. Their particular type of caring is often demonstrated in an effort to amend the systemically-induced educational deficiencies of African American students. Furthermore, researchers have found the practices of these caring teachers to be associated with positive school outcomes for students, such as increased attendance, improved self-perception, renewed dedication to education and successful post-high school outcomes (Irvine, 1999, 2002; Morris & Morris, 2000, 2002; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Thompson, 2004; Ware, 2006).

In discussing the positive influence of teacher care for African American students I do not mean to imply that African American teachers hold a monopoly on care. Important examples of successful European American<sup>3</sup> teacher care exist throughout the current literature (Dillon, 1989; King, 1991, 1993; Cooper, 2002; Parsons, 2005) and many teachers of other ethnicities clearly exhibit care for African American students and work hard to see them succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Howard, 2001a, 2001b; Cooper, 2002; Irvine, 2002). Nevertheless, the purpose of

this article is to give voice to the under-represented—that is, to explore African American teachers' perspectives and definitions of care for their African American students.

This article will discuss emergent themes revealed through the counter stories of eight 'successful' African American secondary teachers who discussed their caring behaviour toward African American students. From these discussions emerged a theoretical construct I have termed 'culturally relevant critical teacher care' (CRCTC). This construct describes African American teachers' definitions and perceptions of their caring for African American students, many of which appear to be based in certain extant literatures such as care theory, critical race theory and the literature on African American teachers pre- and post- the 1954 USA Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*; a decision that called for the racial desegregation of American public schools.

### *Care theory*

The ethic of care as a theoretical framework is understood from many perspectives. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have contributed to this body of knowledge and have defined care in various ways (e.g. see Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002a, 2006; Siddle Walker, 1993; Tarlow, 1996; Agne, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Owens & Ennis, 2005). Because of its multiple characterisations, the definition of care can seem muddled and, in fact, is often more tacit than clearly established.

Carol Gilligan (1982), a pioneer in the field of care theory, discusses an 'ethic of care', which she says:

contains the ideals of human relationship, the vision that the self and the other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair; the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt. (p. 63)

Gilligan's theory primarily suggests a parallel, feminised scheme of development to Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development. In this, she suggests the consideration of care above the ethic of justice on a Kohlbergian scale and further establishes a paradigm where 'people, including women, are seen and heard within the context of their own histories' (Jorgensen, 2006, p. 186).

Noddings (1984) modified Gilligan's work and expanded its application to the classroom, while simultaneously acknowledging its accessibility to both male and female caregivers. Although it is often mistaken as such, Noddings' care is not simply a self-effacing type of behaviour. Noddings clarifies this important point in her work by stating that caring is embedded in reciprocal relationships and requires a certain amount of trade in kind.

In other work, foundational to this study, Noddings (2002b) reveals some of the issues and concerns of cultural relevance. For example, Noddings states, 'Two students in the same class are roughly in the same situation, but they may need very different forms of care from their teacher' (p. 20). She also notes the 'difficulties of

knowing another's nature, needs, and desires when one party holds power over the other or is a member of a group that has historically dominated another' (Noddings, 1992, p. 3). Her words undergird some of the many reasons why awareness of subaltern definitions and perspectives of teacher care are important if researchers and practitioners intend to successfully address the different educational and cultural needs of individuals from various ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The fields of care and moral development theory have often empirically and theoretically overlooked teacher care, its connection to culture and its powerful influence in the lives of African American students. While quite a few researchers have been pioneers in the conversation addressing the convergence of cultural relevance and care, minimal attention has been given to African American children in the care/justice debate. Attending to the context of caring with African American students and students in other marginalised populations would extend the ideas of Gilligan and address the shifting characteristics of care based on group affiliation aforementioned by Noddings (e.g. Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004). Others have discussed African American teacher care (Siddle Walker, 1993; Foster, 1997; Irvine, 2001), but this discussion is often a side note, buried in other extant concerns. Therefore the absence of, and need for, the inclusion of African American teachers' viewpoints in a discussion surrounding caring, aligns this article with certain concerns expressed by legal and educational scholars who are founders of critical race theory.

### *Critical race theory*

Critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework first derived from the legal field in the 1980s, when scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado and Alan Freeman searched for a way to more directly and adequately address race and racism in the USA. They attempted this by challenging the ways in which race and racial power were constructed, represented and wielded through the law. In the early 1990s, scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (1995) applied the tenets of CRT to the field of education to be used as a theoretical and analytical framework in educational research (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

Critical race theory primarily consists of three loosely formed principles. First, CRT stresses the need to interrogate how the law reproduces, reifies and normalises racism in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Second, CRT entails 'interest convergence', a belief that European Americans will be concerned about the interests of people of colour only when those concerns promote the self-interests of European Americans (Lopez, 2003). Third, and most pertinent to this article, CRT acknowledges two differing accounts of reality—dominant reality and subaltern reality. Furthermore, this particular tenet of CRT opines that racial reality has been filtered out of most conversations concerning communities of colour in American society. Therefore we are encouraged to focus on the telling of 'counter-stories', experiential accounts by people of colour that challenge the dominant

legal, political and ideological thinking about race and power (Parker *et al.*, 1998, 1999; Lopez, 2003).

In the field of education, CRT similarly reflects the three foundational premises shared above. Here, however, the language of CRT expands and changes to include an examination of race and racism within educational concerns. Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that CRT addresses the conceptual realities of categories like, 'school achievement, middle classness, maleness, beauty, intelligence, and science, existing as normative categories of Whiteness', while 'Blackness' is marginalised and categorised as de-legitimate (p. 19).

As is well known, the USA has historically created a painful chasm between 'Whites', who are primarily of European American descent, and 'Blacks', who are primarily of African diasporic heritage. Thus, the examination of 'Blackness' in the CRT literature primarily refers to this same homogeneous grouping of African diasporic peoples in the USA. However, it is important to note that other non-White groups in the USA, such as Latino/a-Americans, have utilised the CRT construct as a way in which to interpret the subjugation of their own populations. Nevertheless, in this case, CRT acknowledges that in the USA 'Blackness' has moved beyond a mere racial or cultural categorisation into a larger-than-life caricature of ill-conceived racial stereotyping.

According to Ladson-Billings (1998), much of the scholarship of CRT focuses on the role of 'voice' in bringing additional power to discourses of racial justice. A main intersection of this article and CRT emerges through the examination of African American teacher voices sharing definitions and perceptions of care for African American students. These definitions and perceptions have provided themes, which instigate cognitive conflicts, demonstrate how the law reproduces, reifies and normalises racism in society and generate a closer look at the significance of race and the ways it influences teacher care, students and educational outcomes.

### *African American teacher care pedagogy*

According to Irvine (2002), King (1993), Siddle Walker (2000), Foster (1997) and others, prior to the 1954 USA Supreme Court's landmark decision, *Oliver Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which called for the desegregation of US public schools, Black teachers were largely single-minded in the way they approached the education of African American children. Many of these teachers were noted for bringing unique culturally relevant pedagogical approaches to their classrooms in which they held unrelentingly high expectations, introduced socio-political critique, participated and lived in the surrounding community and served as role models, intercessors, 'other mothers' and philanthropists for their students. Many were described as 'tenacious' when working with students to make certain that everyone worked to his or her highest potential and was able to have future success (Jones, 1982; Johnson & Prom-Jackson, 1986; Siddle Walker, 2001). Foster (1997), Ware (2006) and Noblit (1993) report almost identical findings in their post-*Brown* examination of African American teaching pedagogy.



*Culturally relevant critical teacher care*

Culturally relevant critical teacher care is a theoretical construct, which can account for the collision of care theory, CRT and the pedagogy of African American teachers. For clarity's sake, I will provide a few brief examples in extant literature prior to sharing how this construct emerged through the findings of this study.

Siddle Walker's (1993) work provides an illustrative example of this type of teacher care pre-desegregation when she shares that her respondents claimed that student-teacher interpersonal relating did not stop in elementary school, but permeated secondary school and even moved beyond. Siddle Walker's student respondents discussed receiving help on financial aid paperwork for college, being encouraged to attend college when not having previously considered it and being given money for fees. Students in other pre-*Brown* work such as Jones (1982) mention the particular care that their teachers devoted to preparing them for a world where they had to work twice as hard as White people to get half as far. These are examples of teachers caring through expressing and addressing concern for student futures. This belief that students would not be helped by European American society caused some African American teachers to care by preparing their students to work harder than those of other races and these caring behaviours demonstrate interest convergence, an aforementioned aspect of CRT. These types of care behaviours also communicate a shared understanding of common subaltern status between teachers and students.

Foster's (1993) work further reveals African American teacher apprehensions about students' futures, both pre- and post-desegregation. Her respondents discussed concerns that the current trend toward high stakes testing, accountability and teacher/administrator pay for performance, may perpetuate African American student inequality and contemplated the effects of such educational policies on the prospects of higher education for African American students. Teachers, furthermore, expressed distress at the potentially negative impact of such policies. Here again, Black teachers, in caring for African American students, are also participating in the third premise of CRT by sharing their counter stories and exemplifying the first premise of CRT in which they interrogate how the law, in this case educational policy, reproduces, reifies and normalises racism in society. These examples, in which African American teacher care and CRT intersect, are where the spectre of CRCTC begins to emerge.

It must be noted that there is some extant dissention about Black teachers' expectations of and differentiations between students based on socio-economic status (SES), skin tone and other issues (Siddle Walker, 1993; Foster, 1997; Rist, 2002). Nevertheless, the overwhelming trend in the literature confirms that many African American teachers feel a need to be vigilant in the fight against ongoing structural inequalities for African American youth and often demonstrate this dedication in their classrooms in unique ways, thus providing culturally relevant critical teacher care.

## Study methods

The purpose of this article is to explore heretofore under-examined themes that underlie African American secondary teachers' perspectives and definitions of care for their African American students. Specifically, the research questions guiding this study were as follows: (1) how do 'successful' African American secondary teachers define teacher care for their African American students; (2) what specific behaviour/attitudes/critical incidents do successful African American secondary teachers perceive as examples of their care for African American students (if any); and (3) what explanations do African American teachers provide for their reported caring behaviour?

This research utilised phenomenological inquiry, in which perception is regarded as a primary source of knowledge and describes lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Groenewald, 2004). The use of phenomenology calls for an *epoche* or 'bracketing', a suspension of all judgement about what is real until that judgement is founded on a more certain basis and an inductive rather than deductive reduction and analysis of data (Seidman, 1991; Creswell, 1998; Groenewald, 2004).

### *Phenomenological conflicts*

Although the philosophical foundations of this idea are valid, there are concerns with the requirements of 'absolute suspension of judgment' that have been discussed by researchers such as Maso (2001). He links phenomenology and ethnography and posits considerable shortcomings in the traditional view of the nature of phenomenological inquiry. Maso states that the method of phenomenological reduction is a utopian ideal that cannot be reached without eliminating the very phenomena that researchers are interested in. He argues that the bracketing procedure underlies the same socially and, in this case culturally, contingent prejudices and presuppositions that it attempts to dismantle. Thus, it becomes important not to frame phenomenological goals, methods and findings in absolute terms.

In ethnography, an emerging awareness of researcher positionality, sometimes characterised as the 'reflexive turn' (Emerson, 2001), has facilitated a seismic shift in the ways researchers locate themselves within the context of their own research and writing (Coffey, 1999). I am African American and a former teacher of primarily African American students. Given these aforementioned concerns, I argue, as does Seidman (1991), that the influence of my researcher bias and positionality on processes such as bracketing, contribute to the validity and sophistication of the phenomenological findings of this study.

The use of phenomenological inquiry to investigate care has been questioned by some researchers (Sartre, 1956; Derrida, 1978) due to the 'transcendental or pure consciousness' requirements of this methodology; however, I support the position of Noddings (2002b), who undertakes the examination of a 'phenomenology of care' (p. 13) by seeking a wider, more universal description of the phenomenon itself. I selected this approach because in constructing a view of something that has not been



previously defined, such as African American secondary teacher perceptions/definitions of teacher care for African American students, it seemed best to open my consciousness to an emergent understanding of the phenomenon itself.

I approached this inquiry through a modified use of Seidman's (1991) in-depth phenomenologically-based interviewing method. This method combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology. According to Seidman, in-depth interviews create the ability to respond affirmatively to the validity of the questions because of the features inherent in his three-tier interview process. In this process, the first interview has a focus on concrete details of the participants' present experiences and participant understandings regarding the phenomenon of study. The second interview asks participants to reflect on, elaborate and clarify prior responses or address questions that develop from emergent themes. The third interview encourages respondents to review, comment on or extend the context of their narratives. This process places participant comments in context and its building-block nature encourages participants to check for the internal consistency of what they say.

### *Participants*

Participants (pseudonyms used) in this study were eight, purposefully selected, 'successful' African American secondary teachers who taught in one of two public schools (pseudonyms used) in a metropolitan region of a south-eastern city in the USA. The schools were selected because their populations of students and teachers were primarily African American. One school, Marvin Konnor, consisted of a student population of middle-SES; the other, Jefferson, was of low-SES. Both schools had a majority African American student population of at least 96%. Teachers were deemed successful through the process of 'community nomination' (Foster, 1997), whereby members of a specific community of interest suggest individuals who they believe to be the best subjects for a researcher to interview. School principals and parents were asked to identify teachers who 'were exceptionally successful in helping African American students achieve academically'. Study participants came from a final list of teachers nominated by both groups. Each suggested participant was then contacted through email and/or letter and their participation in an interview about teacher care was requested.

### *Data sources and collection*

Each teacher was interviewed three times for a total of 24 interviews. The first 90-minute interview concentrated on concrete details of the participants' present experiences and understandings regarding their care for Black students. Here, participants explained their definitions, philosophies and perceptions of their teacher care, as well as details of experiences upon which their perceptions were built.

The second interview was structured in such a way as to elicit deeper understandings about meanings and perceptions of themes, issues, stories or statements from the

previous interview. Furthermore, teachers were asked to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of their experiences, to address, 'the intellectual and emotional connections between their work and life' (Seidman, 1991, p. 12). During the third interview, respondents reviewed their personal profiles/narratives and were encouraged to review, comment on or extend the context of their narratives.

*Field notes.* As a secondary source of information, I recorded non-verbal signs, body language or descriptions of classroom surroundings through the use of fieldnotes, which were integrated with the respondents' interview transcripts.

### *Data coding and analysis*

Using a combination of methodologies espoused by Colaizzi (1978) and Creswell (1998), data from this study were coded and analysed in a four-stage process.

The first stage employed bracketing of the information, which is also known as phenomenological reduction or first level coding. In this step, I extracted sections of text from all transcribed data that represented statements significant to the research questions, while simultaneously noting any emergent themes. After extraction, I charted each significant statement by individual teacher.

The second level of analysis involved creating formulated meanings of significant teacher statements and constructing brief profiles and/or 'counter stories' of the interviewees as both an act of interpretation and analysis (Siedman, 1991; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Groenewald, 2004). The third step, informed by Colaizzi (1978), called for clusters of themes to be organised from the aggregated formulated meanings of step two. These clusters represented themes that emerged from and were common to all of the participants' descriptions of teacher care. In step four, all aforementioned steps were integrated, resulting in an 'exhaustive description' of the phenomenon of African American teacher care for African American students; which, according to Creswell (1998), provides 'as unequivocal a statement of the essential structure of the phenomenon as possible' (p. 280). A culmination of all analyses led to the findings of this study.

## **Findings**

Across the eight teachers studied, teacher care for African American students was defined through self-described behaviour that addressed the realities of racism in students' lives, reflected aspects of CRT and mirrored existing literature on African American teachers pre- and post-*Brown*. In the study, teachers' definitions coalesced into 11 overarching themes; however, this article addresses only two themes that emerged most frequently: *political clarity/colour talk* and *concern for students' futures*. The racialised nature of these themes connotes the need for a new theoretical construct of our current understandings of caring in the field of moral development and moral education.

*Political clarity*

Colour talk, closely related to political clarity, takes place when marginalised teachers of colour inform marginalised students of their same culture about the challenges and issues germane to being a member of that culture in the USA (Wilder, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Thompson, 2004). Political clarity, also referred to as socio-political critique, describes conversations that may be held between student and teacher or teacher and parent in which a teacher acknowledges that race does make a difference in the realities that are experienced in everyday life and critiques any racialised assumptions based on that difference (Thompson, 2004; Rolón-Dow, 2005). Because they are so closely related, these two terms—colour talk and political clarity—will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

When Black teachers participate in communication such as that described above, their behaviour demonstrates a willingness to unmask hidden faces of racism by exposing and unveiling White privilege and its effects in its various permutations. This behaviour is a clear demonstration of the first tenet of CRT. Examples of this premise are found in the work of Siddle Walker (1993) and others who examine Black teacher pedagogy pre-desegregation. More recently, research shows that African American teachers post-desegregation think of teaching Black students as a special mission in which they should demonstrate political clarity/colour talk as did their predecessors (Knight, 2004). This type of teacher ‘agonize(s) over the disintegration of urban and rural Black communities, the rampant materialism of the society, and the devastating effect these conditions have had on the students they teach’ (Foster, 1997, p. xlvii).

In illuminating the theme of political clarity, which also demonstrates the first tenet of CRT, many teachers indicated that they believed Black students ‘needed them’ to ‘tell them the truth, be there for them, help them to know, force them to perform’. Here, teachers talked about their beliefs that the students needed them in order to understand the futility of ‘those little rapper and dancer dreams fuelled by BET’,<sup>4</sup> the impact, existence and potential effects of racism and ways to combat racism. Several teachers also talked about *making* students understand the importance of education and emphasised that they believed, for Black people, academic achievement would eventually equal equality.

Respondents also utilised political clarity when telling students about the increased challenges they would face as members of a marginalised population and advising students in the art and necessity of code switching<sup>5</sup> (Flowers, 2000). Some teachers, like Mrs Carter, espoused this type of advice when she said:

There are a lot of people out here in the big big world, and so they [students] need to be ready, they need to be marketable—so that—if your name is Quanyeshia—can we go in and leave some of the letters out? Can we work this out? So that when your application is looked at, you’re not identified. So it’s things like that that I try to talk to my students about. (FC Trans I)

The encouragement of code switching was further demonstrated by teacher suggestions that students change their speech, dress or behaviour to reflect a more

Europeanised or ‘neutral’ background for the purposes of occupational or educational advancement. The moral implications of encouraging students to act outside themselves are complex, as are the cultural connotations of implying that students’ names, dress or behaviour are ‘unacceptable’ (Roberts, 2009).

Further statements demonstrating political clarity were much like one made by Mrs Delano. When talking about the need to prepare Black students to combat racism, she emphasised that:

I just figure that’s [racism is] the way it’s going to be because they’re [White people are] going to take care of each other, regardless. They have the good old boys. They don’t care what you know, who you know or whatever. (FD Trans I)

This statement is an example of teachers’ inclusion of the first and second tenet of CRT in their descriptions of teacher care. Here teachers, demonstrating their awareness of the prevalence of racism in society, espoused a belief that European Americans do not intend to act on behalf of African Americans and some alluded to interest convergence as the only possible catalyst for this behaviour. See Table 1 for examples of the relationship between individual statements and thematic categories and Table 2 for the charted frequency of individual teacher references to the broader thematic categories.

Numerical representations in Table 2 provide a means to access the relative emphasis teachers placed on each category. It is important to note that particular respondents, who had a great deal to say about these particular topics, skew some of the numerical totals. However, based on these representations, addressing future concerns and political clarity emerged not only as significant to teachers in defining care for African American students, but also as significant examples of the emergence of CRT in descriptions of African American teacher care.

Table 1. The relationship between individual themes and thematic categories: care for African American students

Thematic category	Individual statements
Political clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We’re going to build a better life. I’ve got to be passionate about this.</li> <li>• I talk about the negative images created by BET.</li> <li>• I always tell them, what kills Africans is that we don’t have a family structure.</li> <li>• I tell them—the bottom line is you have to work harder.</li> <li>• I encourage my students to learn how to code switch.</li> <li>• I have to tell students about racism because sometimes they forget.</li> </ul>
Addressing future concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I help students understand life in the real world.</li> <li>• I talk to them about economic equality.</li> <li>• I bring my daughter around a lot so they can see...</li> <li>• I try to discount the BET achievement mentality.</li> <li>• I try to eliminate test phobias for Black students.</li> <li>• I tell them, you’ve got to work harder. Society’s already written you off.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Frequency of individual teacher references to broader thematic categories: care for African American students

Teacher	Political clarity	Addressing future concerns
Dotson	1	4
Carter	1	0
Hope	1	1
Armstrong	4	5
Delano	4	3
Green	3	3
Simpson	1	1
Irvine	1	1
Summary of references	16	18

*Concern for students' futures*

In addressing future concerns with their students, findings from researchers such as Foster (1993) and others show that African American teachers are often proficient in understanding and appreciating community norms and concerned that their students master much more than the content of specific subjects; indeed, the students are to master life. Many teachers described in the literature express hope that, if complete mastery of content is not within reach, they can help students understand the personal value, collective power and political consequences of selecting or rejecting academic achievement. This contention is bolstered by King's (1993) comprehensive literature review, which reveals a trend in which African American teachers viewed their care about African American youth and education as 'one step in improving the quality of life for all Americans' (p. 117).

When addressing concerns for the futures of Black students, teachers in this study talked about the importance of introducing students to vocational possibilities that could be attained with or without a college degree and recounted telling students about the importance of staying away from things that would sully students' academic, financial or criminal records in the future. One teacher, Mrs Dotson, described caring for some of her students who would not be attending college:

A class that I attended that University Tech offered that allowed us to talk to the technical schools....Companies, co-ops we have with electricians in the state, I bring all of that into the classroom for them. (ED Trans I)

In another demonstration of concern, Mrs Hope mentioned that she advises her African American students to avoid:

get[ing] in trouble with the law. Don't get *any* kind of record, because that will haunt you. The number one question they ask you when you apply for a job is, 'do you have a criminal record?' Don't give *anybody, anything* to use against you. (AH Trans I)

Teachers explained they felt a commitment to help students navigate the underpinnings of a racist American society in order to appropriately prepare them for the

future. One of the ways they demonstrated this commitment was by teaching students to question dominant European American media and political perspectives. For example, here, Mr Armstrong explains how he reminds students that the world is bombarded with negative media perspectives of African Americans and encourages them to create their own understandings:

I tell these kids, 'We need to give a new image of y'all, because BET...' if you ever get a business, you go overseas and you want to get into this global economy and these people have only seen African American stuff on TV, when they see you, that's the only thing going through their minds....And ladies [demonstrates talking to female students], them Asians, they have a funny way of doing business. You don't want to be looked at as no sexual creature. You want to be taken serious. Blacks, when we say companies discriminate, how can IBM or Compaq, these big companies, send you overseas to help close an account when the only image of African Americans is negative? You've got to fit a certain mode. I'm not saying that they don't discriminate, but we've got to at least be part of the solution. (JA Trans II)

Although there is more to be said in a fuller examination of some parts of Mr Armstrong's statement, here we must acknowledge this teacher's insistence that his students evaluate, contemplate and address how they will be viewed at a future time on a *global* stage as a key example of concern for student futures and another example of the collision of the tenets of care, CRT and African American teacher pedagogy.

### **Implications: CRCTC, the difference makes a difference**

Most definitions provided by my respondents demonstrated care pedagogy that extends beyond the current moral development literature and its characterisation of the varying nature and definition of care. During this study, teachers consistently recounted behaviour that clearly displayed a belief that African American children should be cared for in ways that differ from their European American counterparts. Here, I intend to extend the implications of these findings to the field of moral development while reiterating the existence of these behaviours in the literature on caring and moral development, CRT and Black teacher pedagogy.

#### *Caring and moral development*

For the most part, results of this study do not challenge, but instead add depth to, the literature on the ethic of care in moral education. Focusing on the affective needs of students over other concerns, the caring for African American students that has been revealed reflects many aspects of traditional colour blind discussions of the ethic of care such as engrossment, the existence of a one-caring, a focus on human condition, modelling, practice and being in relation (Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995, 2002b; Tarlow, 1996). Yet, when one takes a closer look at the intersection of CRT, African American teacher pedagogy and care, as applied by African American teachers for African American students, an extension or deepening of teacher caring theory evolves.



Teachers in this study, in expressing concern for students' futures and communicating with political clarity, are caring for their African American students by communicating counter narratives, which dispel the colour blind, equal opportunity myth that is often perpetuated in schools about subaltern students and their opportunities for success. This kind of caring is something that African American students need in order to experience more success with realistic challenges that they face in and outside of American schools due to the prevalence of racism and hegemonic influences in American society. This kind of caring also provides a counter narrative to current discussions of teacher care as colour blind actions that 'try to help all students' or are considered 'just part of good teaching'. Therefore, findings of this study imply that this type of caring may be its own facet of teacher caring theory, CRCTC, which, if unexplored, may render the very corpus of moral development and care theory—colourless.

*Critical race theory—a connection to African American teacher care pedagogy*

All three tenets of CRT are reflected in the findings of this study. The first premise of CRT was present in the findings as teachers actively attempted to interrogate how the law reproduces, reifies and normalises racism in society with their students. Through things teachers claimed to share with their students, they demonstrated socio-political critique (Ladson-Billings, 2000), provided political clarity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) and encouraged code switching (Flowers, 2000).

Findings concerning the second tenet of CRT, interest convergence, were also evidenced by respondents who made explicit statements about their participation in colour talk/political clarity with students. Teachers' statements of this nature provided examples of teachers' personal, though undefined belief in interest convergence—a demonstration of understanding by at least some teachers that European Americans will not challenge the racist *status quo* unless the challenge promotes the self-interests of European Americans (Lopez, 2003).

The third tenet of CRT was demonstrated through the teachers' counter stories. These teachers clearly defined their racially-motivated actions on behalf of their students as care. The stories each teacher told of his or her caring, seem to suggest that the question is no longer, 'whether CRT has penetrated the classrooms of students of color' (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22) but, instead, how researchers, teacher educators and we in the field of moral development can identify, share and utilise teacher counter stories to better inform the education of pre-service teachers.

Although this article focuses on only two emergent themes, 11 overarching themes of the larger study were similar to those found in the historical literature on African American teacher care pre-*Brown* and emergent categories found in more contemporary understandings of African American teacher-student relationships (Ware, 2006). The presence of so many similar variables suggests a contemporary existence of teacher caring that in many ways replicates the caring historically demonstrated by African American teachers on the behalf of African American students. Such a recurrent emergence of successful African American teaching pedagogy suggests that

pre-service teachers developing their own practices may benefit from a historical examination of this type of successful, culturally relevant, teacher pedagogy. Furthermore, this work implies that the field of moral development may benefit from a closer examination of culturally relevant teacher caring and how/whether that caring influences education within specific communities and cultures.

## Conclusion

This article is entitled *Towards a theory of culturally relevant critical teacher care* because, at this point, CRCTC is only a theoretical hypothesis. Although teacher responses in this study may implicate it as a type of African American teacher care pedagogy, there are still many unexamined complexities underlying this implication. When we begin to unpack this concept, there are emergent aspects of teacher denial, encouragement of code switching and harsh criticism of African American youth culture that are both complex and troubling. Furthermore, various aspects of expressed teacher beliefs and behaviour found in this study catalyse innumerable cognitive conflicts within current understandings of moral development and there is still more to be learned from comparative perspectives of European American teachers or teachers from other cultures. Yet, the emergent themes of political clarity and concern for student futures seem important, even essential, pieces in providing an education that values the culture and addresses the concerns of African American students. Clearly, there is more work to be done to establish and/or better understand CRCTC and its educational benefits, if any. As Irvine (2001, p. 8) says, ‘we must do further work to understand “the complexity of a term that seems so simple—care”’.

## Notes

1. Subaltern has classically been used as a British military term for a junior officer. More recently, educational theorists in the US have used the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to any person or group perceived to be of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. The drive to acknowledge subaltern populations calls for an examination of history, or in this case education, from under-represented perspectives.
2. In the USA, this terminology often is used interchangeably with Black or Black American and often includes those of African Caribbean or African Canadian heritage who often seem to share some of the same cultural characteristics. For the purposes of this study, I will not differentiate between the aforementioned subgroups and will refer to all as African American or Black.
3. According to the Census 2000 (United States of America Census Bureau, 2000) definition this category refers to, ‘A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East or North Africa’. In the USA, this definition is often used to describe those of primarily European descent and does not often include those of Middle Eastern or North African heritage. For the purposes of this study, I will mirror the common US mode of definition and will refer to those of primarily European descent as White or European American.
4. Black Entertainment Television—a cable network that broadcasts music videos with what the participants perceived to be negative portrayals of African Americans.

5. Code-switching, a term denoting the concurrent use of more than one language, or language variety, in conversation (Flowers, 2000). In this case, teachers were instructing their students to speak and act more like European Americans in order to more easily achieve success.

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